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AUTHOR Crossan, Beth; Martin, Ian; Whittaker, Susan
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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technology (ICT) within the lifelong learning agenda has the potential to maintain or activate citizenship, in both social and political terms, among older people in a Scottish context. Within recent government documents at both the United Kingdom and the Scottish level, the aims of the two major traditions of citizenship in Western political thought--the liberal tradition and the civic republican tradition--are linked with the use of ICT. The goal in Scotland is to increase access to the Internet. However, although many ICT-based initiatives have been funded, almost all have been targeted at youth or the unemployed. Older people have been marginal to policies for technological development. Reasons for less ICT use among older age groups are lack of access, feeling that ICT is not relevant or useful to them, and feeling they are too old to start using ICT. ICT use is growing due to older people's perception of ICT as a tool to maintain or extend social networks. The concept of communities of practice and the process of legitimate peripheral participation is proposed as a way to form an interesting position from which to examine older people's use of ICT as a potential tool for maintaining or activating citizenship. (Appendixes include 24 references and a diagram summarizing a future research approach.) (YLB)

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Beth Crossan
Ian Martin
Susan Whittaker

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Learning, identity and citizenship: Researching older people's use of ICT in Scotland

Beth Crossan, Glasgow Caledonian University, Ian Martin, University of Edinburgh, and Susan Whittaker, Glasgow Caledonian University

Introduction

Two years ago in Scotland we witnessed the setting up of a separate Parliament for Scotland. With the establishment of this Parliament we now have control over some, but not all, of the major policy areas, including education. The responsibility for policy development in adult education lies with the Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Department of the Scottish Executive.

At the present time the concept of lifelong learning is high on the political agenda. As has been argued elsewhere (Cloonan, 2000), the lifelong learning agenda as articulated in current Government policy has two overlapping strands: economic competitiveness and social inclusion. In policy terms, it extends the notion of being able to take part in learning opportunities at any age and stage of life, which will not only improve individual employability but also aid social cohesion, active citizenship and the building or strengthening of communities. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and the drive towards being an Information Society have been given a key role with Government policy.

Lifelong learning is, however, a contested term. One of the main criticisms is that the economic focus dominates the agenda. While participation in secure and well paid employment is obviously important, within Government policy it is argued that the dominant discourse of lifelong learning is premised on an economistic model, which places participation in the workforce above notions of social justice, active citizenship or community development (Gallacher and Crossan 1999). This can result in an emphasis on skills development for those in the labour market, or as preparation for participation in the labour market, while other more marginal groups (such as single parents, long term unemployed, people with disabilities or older people) receive much less attention.

Following this argument, if certain sections of society are not given access or equal access to lifelong learning opportunities, in particular those who are out-with the 'employability' focus, we would argue that lifelong learning remains only a partial discourse.

In order to investigate this we have made the focus of our talk a group who are often marginalised, stereotyped and stigmatised in many ways: older people. Here we define older people as those who are past working age and out-with the labour market. It must also be remembered that older people are not a homogenous group, but diverse and heterogeneous with differences in experience relating to income, gender and ethnicity. In Western societies old age is most often presented in both lay and political discourses as a time of withdrawal from society, of dependence, and loss of 'self'. As the potential of ICT within the lifelong learning agenda has been given a key role, the central question we wish to explore is: to what extent do new technologies have the potential to maintain or to activate citizenship, in both social and political terms, amongst older people in a Scottish context. This brings together

common interests which we have: Ian's longstanding interest in citizenship, Susan's interest in the use of ICT and the concept of communities of practice and Beth's interest in the lives and experiences of older people. We are in the process of developing these ideas as a research bid.

Our talk will be structured as follows:

- Citizenship and ICT
- Older People's use of ICT
- Communities of Practice as a potential theoretical framework for taking us forward.

Citizenship and ICT

As a central interest in our work is: *How ICT can maintain citizenship for older people?* it is first necessary to look at the concept of citizenship. There are two major traditions of citizenship in Western political thought: the liberal tradition and the civic republican tradition. The liberal tradition reflects a definition of citizenship as an individually ascribed political status which is enacted within the formal politics of the state, mainly by exercising the right and responsibility to vote. The civic republican tradition, on the other hand, embodies a collectively asserted construction of citizenship as a social practice which is enacted within the cultural politics of civil society, ie in social movements and communities. It is important to understand the distinctions as well as the connections between these two traditions of citizenship, and to recognise the symbiotic relationship between them: they need each other if democracy is to be not only a fact of life but also a way of life (Martin, 2001).

This is perhaps the key challenge of 'democratic renewal' in Scotland today. Scottish civil society has acted decisively upon the state in order to change it; the task now is to bring these two spheres of our lives, the civic and the political, into a new and more democratic relationship (see Crowther, Martin and Shaw, 1999). Essentially, therefore, the contemporary Scottish experience suggests that the debate about citizenship is a debate about democracy, ie the kind of society we live in and the kind of society we *want* to live in. Progressive adult education, understood as the education of citizens, should be at the centre of this debate, mediating the relationship between people's membership of social movements in civil society and their participation in the politics of the state (Martin, ibid).

Within recent government documents, at both UK and Scottish level, the aims of both these traditions of citizenship are linked with the use of ICT. For example, a venture called *UK's Communities On Line* has been set up to encourage the use of new technologies in enhancing and sustaining local communities. This approach is based on the belief "that new media technologies have the potential to strengthen the human and organisational networks that already bind local communities together, and also to open new social and economic opportunities for individuals" (Murroni, 1998). In Scotland, new technologies and communities are being linked through *Community Grids for Learning*, funded by the New Opportunities Fund. The aim of these is to provide community-based content for adult learners. Initiatives have been funded to encourage the use of ICT by the voluntary sector, seen as "a big step towards

achieving a connected voluntary sector, where solutions and services to tackle social exclusion are joined up" (Scottish Executive, 22/6/00). An internet fund for libraries in 'disadvantaged areas' has been created. A scheme providing an electronic link-up between community groups and the Scottish Parliament has also been funded. These are just a few examples of investments being made to achieve a vision of Scotland as a fully inclusive Information Age 'which will bring the benefits of using ICT to everyone and will provide the opportunity for all to acquire and improve the skills necessary to participate fully in the global electronic community' (Scottish Office 1999).

There is, however, the danger of a growing 'digital divide', between those who have access to ICT and those who do not. A Digital Scotland Task Force was set up to help direct developments in Scotland, and to give them a distinctly Scottish focus. In the Report, the nature of such a Scottish focus is defined:
"We believe Scotland must seek to understand and anticipate information society developments. Scotland has some strengths and many of the attributes associated with a successful information society. These include manageable size, a sense of common purpose, the potential for strong and committed political leadership, and an experienced and effective education sector....Playing an active part in the information society should be a top priority common endeavour for the next 5 years." (Digital Scotland Task Force Report, 2000)

Achieving an inclusive information society in Scotland is presented as a matter of social justice. Two of the milestones to achieving this goal are: to increase the number of households in disadvantaged areas with access to the internet; and to achieve what is described as Universal Internet Access by 2005. This means that everybody who wants access to the internet will have it (largely through provision of public access points), and that all government services will be available online.

In the meantime, a multitude of ICT-based initiatives has been funded in Scotland. A recent evaluation of these noted that almost all had been targeted at young people or those of working age who are unemployed (Scottish Executive, 2000). Older people, particularly low income older people, have been marginal to policies for technological developments.

Older People and ICT

Before we review older people's use of ICT we will look at the construction of older people as an often marginalised group in Western society. We want to focus on people who, because of age, are no longer active in the labour market and thus are not the focus of the economistic aims of the lifelong learning agenda. Within the UK the demographics of our population are changing, and there is a growing number of older people. Most often this is presented, in both lay and political discourses, in negative ways as a 'rising tide' of older people, or the 'grey time bomb'. The potential of older people to contribute to society, or for this to be a positive time of life, is often overlooked. We would argue that ICT could have potential for older people to maintain or to active citizenship in both social and political terms, and that this potential has to be investigated.

Despite the relative neglect of older people in these policy areas, there are some recent UK government initiatives aimed at increasing ICT-related opportunities for

older people. ICT Learning Centres are being set up to provide local access to ICT equipment and training for disadvantaged older people. 'Computers Within Reach' aims to provide some low-income over-60s access to low cost re-conditioned computers. The UK government's *Foresight* initiative produced a report that focused on the applications of ICT in an ageing population:

"Emerging changes in the machinery of government, e.g., devolution and the establishment of new parliamentary systems, have already provided opportunities for new working practices that involve a wider use of ICT" (DTI, 2000).

The report goes on to outline the opportunities such changes could provide for older people, including enabling them to maintain their engagement in the democratic process through provision of access to local and national political processes. It refers specifically to ICT providing "the tools for petitioning and lobbying" and "scope for the development of virtual lobby groups" (ibid).

In terms of older peoples' use of ICT, a recent DfEE study (Russell and Drew, 2001) into ICT access and use found that those aged 55 and over are much less likely to own or use a computer than those aged 54 and under. An Office of National Statistics (ONS) (2000a) study into internet access also found that the proportion of internet users decreases with age, with the percentage of users aged 55 and over broken down in the following way: 28% of those aged 55 to 64 have used the internet, 14% of those aged 65 to 74, and 4% of those aged 75 and more. The reasons for less ICT use amongst older age groups can in part be explained by the common locations for use. Amongst all adults, it was found that the internet was most usually accessed from one's own home (72% of internet users), the workplace (38%), or a school, college, university or other educational institution (24%) (ONS, 2000a). Older adults are less likely to have access to [computers in] a workplace or educational institution than younger adults, and it was found that in 1998-9 only 4% of households of those aged 60 and over had a computer (ONS, 2000b).

Although lack of access is a major reason for non-use, it has also been found that older people are less likely to consider ICT relevant or useful to them, and amongst all adult non-users, 32% stated that they feel too old to start using ICT (Russell and Drew, 2001). In the first UK report on "The Older Generation and the European Information Society", Murroni (1998) concluded that:

"All research on access and ownership of Information and Communications Technology in Britain shows that income is by far the most important barrier to ownership of new technologies while usage is driven essentially by the opportunities offered by work and education. Both factors are acutely 'missing' when we look at older people: they tend to be poorer than average and to be excluded from work and school. They are also likely to need special attention when learning to use the new technologies, because they learn more slowly and have an overall lower degree of familiarity with new technologies."

However, despite the proportionally lower numbers of users amongst the older population and the barriers they face, there are signs that ICT use is growing in significance amongst 'Third-Agers'. A recent survey has found that those aged 65 and over - the 'silver surfers' - are the group taking up the internet at the most rapid rate (Guardian, 24/4/2001). IT-related learning has been found to be the most common form of taught learning taken up by older people (Dench and Regan, 2000). ICT use

would seem, therefore, to be taking on a growing importance amongst those in the Third Age.

Research would suggest that much of the reason for this growing importance is older people's perception of ICT as a tool to maintain or extend social networks. Furlong (1997) found that one of the main reasons for older people starting to use ICT was for access to the internet and email. The attraction of these forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is often their ability to allow easy communication with friends and family. This, however, can lead older people into using the technology for other purposes. According to Imel (1998), "they quickly learn that it also a valuable source of information on financial, health, travel and other topics of interest to them. In addition, through discussion groups and 'chat rooms', they link with individuals who share similar interests." This supports other findings that e-mail "acts as the 'hook' causing users first to realize the advantages of networked technologies and gradually to experiment with more advanced features and services" (Law and Keltner, 1995). Ito, Adler, Linde, Mynatt and O'Day (2001) found in research into the CMC uses of members of an older person's online community that "SeniorNet veterans often mentioned that their needs and thus their participation had changed over the years. A likely path is starting with a light-weight roundtable, dabbling with chat for a bit and then later concentrating on more serious roundtables." These findings support our wish to investigate not just what the 'hook' is, but where older people go from there.

There is therefore fragmented evidence that ICT is becoming more important in the lives of older people who may use this technology for a variety of reasons. What we want to do is to gain, from the perspective of older people themselves, how and why they come to use ICT; at what point or points they enter; and where (if anywhere) this leads them. To do this we require a conceptual and methodological framework that allows us to answer the key research question: To what extent does technology activate citizenship amongst older people in Scotland? To take this further we want to explore the ways in which the use of ICT may be a tool to bring people together into communities where they debate or highlight issues of social and political relevance.

Watson (1997), writing about virtual or online communities, states that "because 'community' is an organising term for those at the top of our society, the rest of us must join existing communities or form new ones should the old ones not suit our needs adequately". Online communities may then be a way for older people to get their voices heard. This would seem to be a route taken more effectively in North America than the UK, for example through the activities, resources and communications of SeniorNet, an organisation of older people using computers. Elsewhere, other more political groups of older people, for example the Raging Grannies, a group of older woman engaged in political action, use their web pages and email lists to 'spread the word' world-wide. Of course it may be the case that older people do not want to be in communities solely with other older people, but we would argue that this technology may provide a way to engage in dialogue about issues of interest with people of all ages, and that online communities may provide a way to maintain, or to active, citizenship in different ways.

In order to generate a theoretical framework which may help us with this work, we have investigated the concept of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

There is a range of ways that ICT use, or more specifically internet or CMC use, could have an impact on both the personal and social dimensions of peoples' lives. Fernback (1997) sums up what one form of CMC use - membership of online communities - could be: spheres for different types of interaction - social, political, economic and cultural. Within Scottish policy we have found evidence of a belief that this and other forms of ICT use could indeed contribute to these different spheres. For example, the Digital Scotland Task Force (2000) sums up what it sees ICT use could do in Scotland: enhance and sustain local communities, through strengthening networks, sharing information and opening up social and economic opportunities; raise awareness; and increase social participation. We would suggest that the outcomes of ICT use (particularly the use of the internet) can be hypothesised as involvement in six different types of social network or community that would sit on a personal-political scale of involvement: practical utility; family/personal relationships; new ideas/interests; civic engagement; social awareness; and political action.

Research in this area should serve to question the assumptions underpinning policy that links ICT access and use with the ideas of social justice and community development. For example, is the 'digital divide' really something to be concerned about? However, the primary aim of research would be to analyse the processes of achieving on-line social participation - the extent to which our conceptualisation of the dimensions of ICT use are accurate, how people enter, and how they move between the different dimensions. The concept of communities of practice may provide us with a basis for examining these processes.

The communities of practice notion lies at the heart of a theory of learning and identity construction through social participation, developed by Lave and Wenger (1991). Communities of practice are a way of describing social networks, the existence of which revolve around a particular practice. In Wenger's (1998) terms, practice is a collective and sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise, and also of the social relationships inevitably involved in pursuing these collective goals. This practice occurs in a historical and social context. Social networks that have the three dimensions of evolving forms of mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire are considered to be communities of practice, and as such are groups that are most likely to provide opportunities for a deep level of social participation and learning.

The process of becoming a member of a community of practice has been defined as *legitimate peripheral participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Legitimate peripheral participation has been theorised as "the process in which the beginner, novice or 'newcomer' becomes an expert or 'old-timer'. This process is most noted by the newcomer's movement from the periphery of a sociocultural 'community of practice' to its center, becoming progressively more engaged and more active within that sociocultural practice" (Hay, 1996). There are therefore varying degrees of membership, with full membership recognised through sharing ways of acting, sharing goals, sharing ways of communicating and understanding, and through participating in the ongoing evolution of all of these through negotiating their meanings with other members.

Summary

What we propose is that the concept of communities of practice and the process of legitimate peripheral participation could form an interesting position from which to examine older people's use of ICT as a potential tool to maintaining or activating citizenship. What we wish to do in our study is to enter into dialogue to older people who are using ICT for a variety of reasons, to understand why older people use this tool, question whether they form or join communities of practice, and examine, in social and political terms, where this participation may lead. Our approach is summarised in the attached diagram. By focusing on this often marginalised group, we will question the 'wholeness' of the Scottish lifelong learning agenda, as well as casting light on the justification that ICT is a potential tool for increasing social justice and citizenship in Scotland.

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